

Translation as a Critical Practice: Using Retranslation when Teaching Translation

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how to relate translation theory to translation practice when teaching translation. Retranslation is viewed as a critical practice (kydd 2011) that integrates critical engagement with existing translations and theory into practice. This critical reflexion is part of translation competence, both in Pym's (2003) minimalist formulation and the European Master's in Translation guidelines. Retranslation can therefore be seen to help students achieve the sort of critical awareness that is part and parcel of translation competence. A series of practical learning activities are suggested that use retranslation. These range from analyses of retranslation of the same text to commented retranslations that ask the students to explain their own process. Each of these offers ways of going beyond textual criticism to engage with wider theoretical concerns.

Keywords: retranslation; translation pedagogy; reflexive practice; translation competence; commentary writing.

Resum. *Traduir com a pràctica crítica: la retraducció en l'ensenyament de la traducció*

Aquest article prova d'exposar com es pot incloure la teoria de la traducció en l'ensenyament pràctic a les aules, i considera que traduir un text ja versionat és un exercici que integra una lectura crítica tant del trasllat com de la teoria traductològica. Com que, tant en la formulació minimalista de Pym (2003), com en les directrius dels màsters europeus en traducció, aquesta consciència crítica és part de la competència traductora, retraduir es pot considerar una manera d'ajudar els estudiants a aconseguir-la. A l'article se suggereixen una sèrie d'activitats que van de l'anàlisi de traduccions d'un mateix text a comentar retraduccions, pràctica que fa que l'estudiant hagi d'explicar els processos que hi ha seguit. Cadascuna d'aquestes activitats ultrapassa la crítica textual i enllaça amb aspectes teòrics més amplis.

Paraules clau: retraducció; pedagogia de la traducció; pràctica mitjançant la reflexió; competència traductora; comentari escrit.

Summary

1. What is translator training for? Bibliographic references
2. Retranslation exercises

The question of how translation theory and translation practice relate to one another is a question that haunts the teaching of translation studies. As Dorothy Kelly notes, there is a perception that much of the research into translation, especially literary translation, is not immediately relevant to translation students (2005: 114–115). This article aims to give one answer to the question: How can practice be linked to theory in translation classes? It is not intended as a definitive answer but as one among many that can be discussed and used as translator trainers see fit.¹

My suggestion revolves around teaching retranslation as a practical activity and the idea of translation as a “critical practice”, following Elspeth Kydd’s (2011) use of this phrase in relation to film. Retranslation, which I am defining here as translation of a text into the target language with full knowledge of a previous translation into the same target language, has comparatively few critical texts that specifically focus on it. A BITRA² search reveals 127 texts about retranslation, while the Translation Studies Abstracts³ database lists 37 texts (both searches 9/8/2013). The subject of retranslation has been studied most in relation to literature (see, for example, Monti and Schnyder 2011, Deane Cox 2011 and O’Driscoll 2011) and drama (e.g. Aaltonen 2003), though it has also received some attention in relation to philosophy (e.g. Susam-Sarajeva 2003), scientific writing (e.g. Xu 2003) and institutional documents (e.g. Koskinen and Paloposki 2003). This diversity of approaches to retranslation would suggest that retranslation cannot be limited to any one domain or genre of text. Yet, as Enrico Monti (2011: 10) has noted, there was no entry for retranslation in the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* or the first edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, although the second edition rectifies this (Tahir Gürçağlar 2009). It is therefore possible to argue that retranslation is not perceived as a concept central to translation studies as a discipline. This is mirrored by its almost complete absence from translator training literature: it is not in the index of Dorothy Kelly’s *A Handbook for Translator Trainers* (2005) or many other books on translator training (Baker 2011, Dollerup and Loddegaard 1992, Gile 1995, González Davies 2004, Hung 2002, Kearns 2008, Kussmaul 1995, Robinson 2012, etc). Don Kiraly (2000: 66) gives the briefest mention to retranslation as a possible activity in his *A Social Constructivist Approach to Translator Training*, but does not explore it further. Interesting-

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 12th Portsmouth Translation Conference ‘Those Who Can Teach’ in November 2012. I would like to thank the organisers for giving me chance to present and the audience for feedback on my ideas.
2. Available at http://aplicacionesua.cpd.ua.es/tra_int/usu/buscar.asp
3. Available at <https://www.stjerome.co.uk/tsa/>

ly, André Lefevere suggested over twenty years ago that “[older] and/or different translations of one and the same text can be very illuminating” (1991: 130) in a translation workshop. He also argues in the same article that a translation workshop is not the only way that translation should be taught; translation should be studied in relation to its place in literary history (Lefevere 1991: 131), which could have the effect of separating critical and practical approaches to translation.

Retranslation is often discussed in more general studies of translation, such as Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995: 205-224), Gideon Toury’s *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995: 166), David Bellos’s *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (2011: 305-311) and Antoine Berman’s *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne* (1995: 40, 191-197), among others. In Berman’s and Venuti’s books, case studies of multiple translations of the same text offer these critics the opportunity to explore how translations have changed over time and to contrast different translator’s approaches to the same text. I would argue that this idea of multiple possible approaches to, and hence multiple translations of, the same text is central to Translation Studies as a discipline. As translations can always be done differently, it is possible to ask why they took the form they did, allowing scholars to explore the causes behind a translation from a range of different angles.

In the classroom, as Lefevere suggested, retranslation also offers the opportunity to explore these multiple causes and for students to reflect on their own choices. Clive Scott’s practice in his *Translating Baudelaire* (2000) and *Translating Rimbaud’s Illuminations* (2006), while based on literary texts, shows ways in which retranslation forces critical reflection. Scott analyses his own experimental retranslations of canonical texts through various critical lenses. Discussion of retranslation can go beyond linguistic and textual reasoning, as David Bellos demonstrates in his chapter on literary translation in *Is That A Fish in Your Ear?* (2011: 305-311). Bellos discusses retranslation in relation to the question of copyright and the commercial status of literary texts, thus linking translation practice to legal issues and the market. This sort of discussion in a classroom can help students to understand the role of translation in contemporary culture (or, indeed, in other historical situations if students are looking at translations from another period).

In this article, I want to explore how the practice of retranslation can be used in the classroom and how this usage relates to the goals of translator training. I am focusing especially on Translation Studies degrees in the UK, as this is the environment I know best, but I would argue that the results can be applied elsewhere, as translator training often has similar goals. First, I would like to discuss those goals with reference to translation competence, before moving on to how retranslation can bring together theory and practice and finally suggesting practical examples of retranslation in the classroom.

1. What is translator training for?

The first question that needs to be answered is: what are the goals of teaching the practice of translation? A basic answer to this is that translator training currently aims to give students translation competence. Answers from other historical peri-

ods might be very different: translation has long been seen as a means of improving foreign language competence as well as improving writing in the student's own language.⁴ "Translation competence" is, however, a multifaceted term that has been interpreted in many different ways. Space restrictions mean that it is impossible to give a full survey of all the approaches to translation competence here, so I am focusing on two definitions: Anthony Pym's (2003) "minimalist" definition of translation competence and the goals and aims of the European Masters in Translation (Gambier 2009).

Pym's article is itself a response to difficulties surrounding the definition of translation competence. Pym surveys the multiple definitions of translation competence, including foundational statements by Wilss (Pym 2003: 482-483) before reviewing how many authors have avoided the issue of translation competence (Pym 2003: 484-485) or segmented it into multiple different competences (Pym 2003: 485-487). By making translation competence multifaceted and detailed, argues Pym (2003: 488), theory cannot keep up with the changes that take place in the translation profession, which themselves introduce new necessities for competences for translators, such as the use of electronic media, new translation memory software, new modes of translating, etc, etc.

Pym's solution is an elegant and simple definition that defines the translation process, based on two skills:

- The ability to generate a series of more than one viable target text (TT₁, TT₂ ... TT_n) for a pertinent source text (ST);
 - The ability to select only one viable TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence.
- (Pym 2003: 489)

This definition of translation competence is interesting in relation to retranslation for two reasons. The first is the way it posits the ability to generate multiple possible target texts as part of translation competence. This possibility of multiple versions is, as I argued earlier, central to Translation Studies as a discipline. There is always more than one way of translating a text, which retranslation demonstrates in practice. The second part of Pym's definition suggests that translators should only choose one solution — this is what translators are expected to do: clean, well edited copy is expected, rather than a text which is full of slash marks and other indicators of possible other versions. For retranslation, one series of solutions has already been used: for the new translation to differentiate itself from the previous ones, the new solutions must be distinct and identifiable. The translator, then, needs to be able to make choices based on a critical reading of the previous translation as well as a reading of the source text. Retranslation, therefore, presupposes a critical approach to translation practice.

4. Indeed, Cicero (1997: 7) argues for translation as a means of rhetorical apprenticeship as early as 55BCE. More recent approaches to using translation in language learning can be found in Malmkjær 1998.

Such a critical ability goes beyond Pym's minimalist definition, but is not beyond the bounds of what we expect from our students. Indeed, the guidelines for translation competence that are connected to the European Masters in Translation (EMT) ask for students to be able to "[master] the appropriate metalanguage" (Gambier 2009: 5), i.e. be able to discuss their own translations using the correct Translation Studies terminology, as well as being able to "justify [their own] translation choices and decisions" (ibid.). The EMT competences are wider ranging than this, including a mixture of language skills, technological skills, intercultural skills, research skills as well as "Translation Service Provision Competence" — the list of competences is long and can be read as a snapshot of the needs or expectations of the translation industry in recent years. Equally, Master's degrees in the UK are expected to follow benchmarking from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which includes knowledge that is informed by "the forefront of their academic discipline" (QAA 2008: 20), again bringing in the relationship between theory and practice.

In relation to retranslation, the EMT's stipulation of being able to explain and justify one's own translations is significant. As I have already mentioned, retranslation presupposes a critical approach to a previous translation: the student must be able to find ways to translate differently from the current translation and justify those choices, or, should she or he use the same solutions, justify why they are optimal. The active use of theory to do so would use the correct metalanguage as well as engaging with current scholarship, fitting the EMT goals and QAA benchmarks.

I am building here a model of retranslation as a "critical practice". Elspeth Kydd [sic] uses the term "critical practice" in relation to film (2011); I am appropriating it for retranslation, though I also believe it can be applied to translation in general. Kydd defines critical practice as:

a process that explores the integration and intersection between the critical analysis of films and the practical aspects of filmmaking. (Kydd 2011: 1)

This is not far from what I am suggesting retranslation is and therefore I could rewrite Kydd, in relation to retranslation:

A process that explores the integration and intersection between the critical analysis of translations and the practical aspects of translating.

This process necessarily includes a combination of theoretical and critical awareness, for how else can one achieve a "critical analysis"? Equally, practice is central. To return to the question I began with, i.e., how do you combine theory and practice when teaching translation?, there seems to be an answer here: through a critical practice of translation. Equally, the use of metalanguage and justification for translation, which the EMT guidelines ask for (among other qualities) are accounted for as the practice of translation is embedded in a theoretical awareness that can be explained. Even Pym's minimal definition of competence,

as I have already argued, suggests this critical awareness through the justified choice of one viable solution.

So, to sum up: translator training is supposed to bring about translation competence, which can be seen to include the core competences of creating and selecting appropriate translation solutions for a given source text and the ability to justify the choice of this particular solution instead of other possibilities. This presupposes some sort of critical awareness, which I am arguing is made explicit in a retranslation based exercise, making it a form of “critical practice”. What I would like to do in the next section is discuss some practical possibilities for that sort of exercise and how they relate to learning.

2. Retranslation exercises

There are several possible ways of incorporating retranslation into the translation curriculum. Possibilities range from readings of multiple translations, which I will start with here, to more practical uses and projects. The emphasis here is on the tutor as “resource planner” (Rogers 1989: 47) rather than some sort of impart-er of knowledge; in other words I am operating within a learner centred model of translation, such as Kelly (2005) and other translation training theorists have proposed. Following the theory of “constructive alignment” (Biggs and Tang 2011: 97-100), the activities practise translation competence in the sense of producing and describing a translation. Students develop their understanding through practice and reflection.

The first use of retranslation in translator training is not really a practical retranslation exercise at all, but rather a reading exercise. Reading is certainly a practical skill, but the focus here is to get students to comment on different translations. This is not translating, but helps lay the ground work for understanding how translation works and practise describing and analysing translations using relevant metalanguage. The exercise can take place in the classroom with minimal preparation or with advance reading: it is quite flexible.

The students are given two or more texts which are translations of the same source text. They may be presented with the source text as well; even in a multi-lingual classroom (i.e. one where not all students are translating in the same language pairs) this can be helpful, as some students will access to it and will be able to make comments based on the source text. The students are then asked to read the different translations of the text and think about how they differ. They may work individually or in groups.

Once the students have located certain differences, the key way of linking theory and practice is to ask *why* those differences appear in the texts: what causes are there for the translator’s decisions? Thinking through this question can lead to all sorts of developments, depending on the level of student and the time available. It could, for example, lead to more in depth research about the time periods in which the translations were written in, or it could lead to research into the translators, including reading any statements they may have made about the translations, or it could lead to research into the genre of text, etc. Already here, then, there is a

possibility for it to extend beyond textual analysis into historical and sociological analysis, allowing students to explore current research in the field. In addition, this seems a good opportunity for students to discuss skopos theory (e.g. Vermeer 2012, Nord 1997) and how it relates to actual translations: by discussing the purpose of each target text, the students should evolve a better understanding of how translations are produced for different audiences and situations.

A second form of retranslation based exercise may be termed “stealth retranslation”. I call it this as it not initially presented as a retranslation exercise, but as a translation of a text. This is more suited to language specific workshops rather than multilingual classes. First students are given a short text to translate. The ST here has been translated before, but the students are not told this. The students do their translation (at home or in class) and discuss it, as would normally happen in any language specific workshop. They find differences among their own translations, note others’ solutions and develop their understanding of the text and its possible translations. There is an excellent opportunity here for students to get peer feedback on their translations. Giving peer feedback can help increase students’ own competences (Biggs and Tang 2011: 147) as well as offering students feedback on their script which is beneficial (see Wang and Han 2013 for a discussion on peer feedback in translator training). After the discussion of the translation, the already published translation is introduced and the students are asked to discuss it: what solutions work well? What would they do differently? Why do they think the translator chose the solutions she or he did?

As the students have already produced their own translations and discussed them, they are less likely to accept the published translation as the definitive version. They can treat it as just one of several possible solutions. By analysing it they develop their own critical abilities, thinking through the causes of the translation as much as other, more immediate textual elements. One difficulty related to this task is that students have little time to analyse the text, as they are presented it in class, so their comments may be somewhat superficial. One possible way around this is to asking the students to prepare their comments on the published text as homework from one week to the next or by allowing students to post their comments on a website or virtual learning environment. This would allow better reflection on the text and could also be used as a starting point for discussion in the next workshop. A second possible difficulty may appear if students do not feel they can criticise a published text. This can be avoided to an extent as the published translation is presented *after* students have produced their own translations and have, therefore, already presented a viable solution. In addition, more focus can be placed on causality in the discussion of the texts, thereby making criticism feel less negative and becoming more of a question of understanding how another translator has made their decisions. This then encourages students to historicise their own translations and see discrepancies between their own work and the published translation not as errors, but rather as evidence of shifts in norms or a difference in focus.

A third exercise may be termed cautiously “retranslation proper”. Here students are presented with source texts and published target texts and asked to pro-

duce a new translation that differs from the previous translation. This is something that translators often need to do, especially in literary translation (Bellos 2011: 307), though, as I discussed at the beginning of this article, retranslation takes place in other fields too. As such, the exercise can be seen to be an authentic task (Biggs and Tang 2011: 212) that is quite clearly linked to learning (Ramsden 2003: 204).

The student's translation should be accompanied by a commentary on how it differs from the already existing translation. The commentary may be oral or written, depending on the needs of the class. The commentary and translation together combine the theory and practice of translation, and can easily be linked to outcomes for translator training. In terms of writing commentaries, reflexive essays by Marilyn Booth (2008) and Cristina Marinetti and Margaret Rose (2013) in addition to Scott's books (2000 and 2006) can be used to help students understand how to write about their own translation. A normal translation and commentary may also link theory and practice, of course (as is the case in Marinetti and Rose 2013), but my argument here is that a retranslation with commentary forces students to engage with other translators' work in a way that is critical, in line with my conception of translation as a critical practice. The exercise can be used to produce formative and summative feedback, both from peers and the tutor.

This exercise can run in a language specific workshop or in a multilingual classroom. In a language specific workshop, it is assumed that all students can read the source text and produce their own translations of it. As they translate in relation to the already existing translations, students will find that they have less possible options: one of the viable solutions for every problem has already been chosen in the published translation. It is not necessary that their translation is totally and wilfully different from the previous translation, but there should be noticeable differences throughout. The students are therefore undergoing a form of constrained writing exercise, as their options are limited to some extent.⁵ At the same time, they are using their translation competence in Pym's (2003) definition of creating and choosing viable solutions in relation to their critical readings of the source text and previous target text. The exercise is therefore a combination of critical reading and creative rewriting. Discussing their solutions in class or in commentaries, students will need to justify their choices: whatever way they do so will involve a theoretical understanding of translation that they will need to explain. The time-old "it sounds better" is still likely to crop up, but can be weeded out through further questioning.

In multilingual form, the exercise is more likely to work if students choose their own source texts. As the rest of the class would be unable to understand the translation alone, the students have to explain their reading of the text, offering gloss translations and interpretations of the previous translations as well as their own solutions. Once more there is a combination of critical and creative processes and the students are forced into a reflexive stance on their own work.

5. The exercise differs from the Oulipo-ian exercises described by O'Sullivan (2012) as there is less emphasis on recreating the formal constraints of the source text.

This exercise can be extended into projects, where students are asked to find their own texts to translate, with the instructions that these texts must have been translated before and they must be able to justify their own retranslation. Other ways of extending would include explicitly asking for some sort of bias in the retranslation, such as a political bias (e.g. feminist). This could lead to students exploring theories and practices of translation that are far from their own preferences. Equally, it can be used in fields where retranslation is less common, such as scientific translation or audio-visual translation: in this case it will highlight the critical action that student is taking precisely because retranslation is less common here and so requires more thinking through. The task can be opened up as far as the tutor and students want to take it.

In conclusion, then, thinking and doing retranslation offers the sort of combination of theory and practice that is part and parcel of translation studies. It can open up all sorts of avenues of investigation, from textual to historical and sociological, that offer the students the opportunity to engage with current scholarship in the field as well as their own practice. It gives students the opportunity to show through practice and reflexive commentary their readings of a source text and its already existing translations. In describing their own retractions, students have recourse to the appropriate metalanguage of translation and show an awareness of translation theoretical concepts (in one form or another). Therefore, it can be seen to be constructively aligned with the goals of translator training.

In many ways, a retranslation based exercise is what students want to put into it. They may decide to go for experimental retranslation in the style of Clive Scott (2000, 2006) or they may hew somewhat closer to the source text, depending on what they see as relevant for the text that they are translating. Retranslation need not be confined to literary texts and the exercise can be applied to texts from other domains. At all times, though, it encourages a critical practice of translation that is informed by a critical reading of other translations and theoretical approaches.

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